



Why Climate Change Has Become the Missing Issue in the Presidential Campaign

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We're in the final few months of what's shaping up to be the hottest year on record. In September, [Arctic](#) sea ice melted to its smallest extent in satellite records, while the Midwest was rocked by a once-in-a-generation level drought. Global carbon dioxide emissions hit a record high in 2011 of [34.83 billion tons](#), and they will almost certainly be higher this year. Despite that fact, the more than two decade-old international effort to deal with [climate change](#) has hit a wall, and the upcoming U.N. [global warming](#) summit in the Qatari capital of Doha — whose residents have among the highest per-capita carbon emissions in the world — is unlikely to change that hard fact.

Given all that, it might seem reasonable to think that climate change —and how the U.S. should respond to it — would be among the top issues of the 2012 presidential election. We are, after all, talking about a problem that has the potential to alter the fate of the entire planet, one that requires solutions that utterly alter our multi-trillion dollar energy system. Climate change has been a subject at the Presidential or Vice-Presidential debates since 1988, as Brad Johnson, who surveys environmental coverage for ThinkProgress, pointed out this week. Yet through all of the 2012 debates, not a single question was asked about climate change, and on the stump, neither candidate has had much to say about the issue — with Mitt Romney more often using global warming as a punchline, and President Obama mentioning it in passing, at most.

That's not to say that the root cause of climate change — energy use — has been ignored. Romney and Obama have sparred over fossil fuel production in the U.S., with each candidate trying to position himself as the bigger booster of domestic oil or natural gas. The shale oil and gas boom in the U.S. is real, and it will be enormously important to the economy and to energy prices in the years to come. But neither Romney nor Obama seem to want to acknowledge the negative environmental effects of producing and consuming more and more oil and natural gas. As Slate's [Will Oremus wrote last week](#):

It started off with an audience member asking Obama whether he agreed with his energy secretary, Steven Chu, that [lowering gas prices isn't his department's goal](#). That sparked an increasingly heated exchange in which both candidates vehemently asserted their fossil-fuel bona fides, without ever mentioning that there might be a downside to reinforcing the country's dependence on oil, gas, and coal. In fact, when Romney accused Obama of not being "Mr. Oil or Mr. Gas or Mr. Coal," the president defended his record of opening public lands for oil drilling and fired back that Romney was no great friend of coal either. And when he criticized Romney for dismissing wind power, he neglected to offer any reason why alternative energy might be a good thing, other than creating some jobs in Iowa. Romney, for his part, allowed that he "appreciates wind jobs in Iowa," before returning to his unwavering support for the holy trinity of oil, gas, and coal.

Environmental groups are so frustrated by the disappearance of climate change as a campaign issue that they recently launched a website, [ClimateSilence.org](#), that argues Romney and Obama have toned down their statements on global warming in a "collective descent toward mute acceptance of global calamity." Translation: climate change is getting worse all the time, but our Presidential candidates can't seem to be bothered to debate about it.

It's not surprising that Romney would avoid talking about climate change. Though he pushed Massachusetts to join other Northeastern states in a regional pact to reduce greenhouse gases early in his term as governor, in the years since, the Republican party has moved almost lockstep into climate denialism — and Romney has proven that he is adept at shifting his beliefs when it's politically expedient. It's still noteworthy though that even as Romney has made moves toward the center over the past month in a successful effort to close the gap with Obama — soft-pedaling his opposition to abortion, insisting he won't cut taxes on the wealthy — he's made no effort to cite climate change as evidence of his moderate temperament. It's as if the Republican campaign has concluded that Americans simply don't care enough about global warming — not now, with the economy foremost on everyone's mind — to bother even pretending that a Romney victory would be good for the environment.

The Obama campaign can point to specific policy initiatives that help combat global warming — including significant improvements in auto fuel efficiency, billions of dollars in investment in clean energy technologies and new regulations that will curb coal pollution. And it's true that Obama does specifically mention climate change in public statements, [as a memo](#) put out yesterday by energy and environmental

officials advising the campaign underscored. There's no doubt that of the two candidates, only President Obama has anything like a plan to deal with climate change, and that global warming is one of the issues about which Romney and Obama are furthest apart.

But it's still notable that in the debates, Obama hasn't brought up global warming on his own, even at moments when it would have helped explain some of his actions over the past four years. In the second debate, for example, after a questioner asked him about what his Administration was doing to about high gas prices, Obama managed to talk about energy for minutes without mentioning the need to eventually reduce carbon emissions, beyond a paean to energy efficiency. When the Keystone XL pipeline came up, Obama didn't talk about the effect that increased U.S. dependence on Canadian oil sands might have on global carbon emissions. Once again, climate change was missing in action.

In the end, though, it's difficult to blame either candidate for dropping climate talk in this election. Beyond committed environmentalists, there hasn't been much evidence that Americans even want to think about global warming, much less vote on it. But the job of a leader — or someone who is applying to become a leader — should involve telling the occasional difficult, even inconvenient truth. That's been missing in this campaign.

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